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Is that Us? Dealing with the ‘Black’ Pages of History in Historical Fiction for Children (1996–2010)

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Abstract History has been in the centre of political interest over the last two decades; claimed as a vehicle to strengthen social cohesion, especially among future citizens. At the same time an acknowledgement of episodes such as slavery and colonialism are asked for. This article investigates the tension that results with those two appeals to history in the literary representation of the black pages of history in children's books. It analyses the strategies used to allow children to identify with a contemporary view on this aspect of history. The Netherlands serves as a case study. Five literary strategies are discerned, placing the books on a scale from national heroization to national alienation: monophonic accounts of Western superiority, child protagonists as mediators between past and present, polyphony, multitemporality and narrative alienation.

Keywords National history · Historical fiction · Identity · Identification · Slavery

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Introduction: History as Bond, Bridge or Break?

Recently in many Western European countries an appeal has been made to history to contribute to the enhancement of social cohesion (Angvik and von Borries 1997; van Oostrom, 2006, p. 20–23; Grever and Ribbens, 2007, p. 11). We do not know who ‘we’ are anymore, Western European politicians and leaders of governments said, we do not know what unites us (Ribbens, 2006, p. 87). French, English and Dutch leaders claimed national identity crises and a lack of social cohesion, due to globalization, individualization and especially immigration (Grever and Ribbens, 2007, p. 13). Fear of fragmentation and disruption ruled, a search for something that joins people together, a national glue, began, and knowledge of a shared past was assumed to have the potential to bring people, especially natives and immigrants, together (Blok, 2004, p. 537; Marijnissen and Verhagen, 2006, p. 14; van Oostrom, 2006, p. 18; Scheffer, 2000a and 2000b).

One of the educational tools that has been recommended by committees initiating projects to familiarize future citizens with their own national history is historical fiction for children. Historical fiction is valued for its potential to enliven the past. It represents macro-scale historical events through micro-stories of individuals living in a past period, in a mixture of fact and fiction. Often the setting is based on facts, while the characters and the plot are fictitious. To create a world that readers can relate to and at the same time describe events, customs and ideas that have long gone by, writers have to find a balance between what John Stephens terms ‘familiarization and alienation’ (Stephens, 1992, pp. 202–203). For familiarization, readers must be able to recognize certain aspects of the story, such as the needs, desires and occupations of the characters, in order to relate to history and a historical character. Alienation, on the other hand, emphasizes the aspect of otherness in order to differentiate between past and present and clarify its (ideological) dissimilarities.

Most historical fiction deploys a humanist position to reconcile the tension between this selfhood and otherness. They feature protagonists expressing qualities and feelings that are presented as transhistorical, constant, and only the social context is subject to historical change (Stephens, 1992, p. 203). However, this view is contested by the conviction that not permanence, but impermanence rules history, and every suggestion of analogy is an ideological construct. In academic historiography the latter conviction and its implications for history writing have been discussed (Jonker, 2006, p. 14). However, this discussion seems not to have reached society. When history was proposed as a solution to social fragmentation, a straight line was drawn from the past to the present, and analogy and permanence were emphasized to articulate who ‘we’ are and how ‘we’ became ‘us’.

However, the conviction that history serves the building of a stronger national identity, or at least a stronger identification with the country, met with an opposite force: an acknowledgement of the so-called ‘black pages’ of history was asked for. Consequently, actually two appeals were made to history: a neonationalistic appeal in which history was seen as a vehicle for national identity and identification and thereby social cohesion, and an appeal to acknowledge the role Western European countries played in morally reprehensible past episodes such as the slave trade and slavery.

The neonationalistic call for the transmission of historical roots to enhance social cohesion resulted in initiatives to integrate historical knowledge more into the lives of citizens, for example by establishing national museums in England, France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands (Aronsson, 2011, p. 1). These projects were aimed at all citizens, although in the discourse two groups of future citizens were particularly mentioned: immigrants and children. If the call for the integration of national history in the lives of citizens is adopted by politicians, history and history education become key factors in the discussion of the integration of immigrants. The result is that naturalization is made dependent on historical knowledge about the new country, where history education might prevent disintegration by providing a bond and a bridge between newcomers and established residents (Blok, 2004, p. 537; van Oostrom, 2006, p. 18).

The dominant perspective of the projects resulting from this has generally been the perspective of representatives of the dominant culture. But the need to give a voice to minorities or even marginalized groups, such as the inhabitants and descendants of colonized countries and groups, was recognized (Pinsent, 2005). Next to the neonationalistic approach of national identity and history, a supranational approach can be discerned, in which multiformity, universal values and world history are central (Grever and Ribbens, 2007, p. 158). However, history projects and also history education were accused of disregarding foreign influences, different cultural backgrounds and especially controversial episodes by critical historians and minority groups (van Boxtel and van Oudheusden, 2001; Moors, 2001).

This article analyzes the tension between the political appeal to history to enforce social cohesion on the one hand and the recognition of the need to give a voice to outsiders within a specific culture on the other. It does so by investigating historical fiction for children. The books that will be scrutinized are all part of a project initiated to enhance social cohesion through history, which meets a neonationalistic agenda. They deal with a 'black' page of history, a page that had long been ignored in history education and historical fiction for children or, at best, been presented from a patronizing 'white' perspective: slave trade and slavery. This meets the appeal to acknowledge the share in morally reprehensible past episodes. The article does not intend to give value judgements on the depiction of this black page of history, although the analyses of the books may point to different ways of dealing with it.

The Netherlands will serve as a case study. When the discussion on history and its black pages arose at the end of the twentieth century, the Netherlands did not have a tradition of historical children's books on the slave trade and slavery. Early historical fiction dealt with it as a side issue, belonging to the customs of the Dutch Golden Age (the seventeenth century), the age that was chosen most often as the setting for historical fiction. In Miep Diekmann's (1965) *Marijn bij de lorrendraaiers* (Marijn at the smugglers, translated as *Slave doctor* in 1970) was published, which became a classic. It tells the story of a Dutch boy who joins the ship of a slave trader and is appalled by the captives' bad treatment and circumstances. He falls in love with a slave girl owned by his family. The book sheds light on many aspects of the slave trade and was carefully researched. However, as in most Dutch historical fiction up until the twenty-first century, the perspective is that of white colonizers.

It took several decades before other Dutch writers dared to write about this black page of history. And again most of them wrote from a white perspective. Only in the Twenty-First Century did some writers try to insert perspectives of slaves. At the same time the Dutch government, following the example of other European countries, gave several renowned Dutch historians the assignment to develop a Dutch historical canon. This 'Dutch Canon' was supposed to include both episodes to be proud of and the black pages of history. It was especially meant for public education and supposed to provide future citizens with a collective story of the country they live in, not to arouse national pride, but to instill a sense of solidarity (van Oostrom, 2006, pp. 23–24).

The Canon was supplemented with material for further reading for each historical episode treated, both fiction and non-fiction. Some of this further reading was written especially for the Canon, whereas other reading material already existed or was published apart from the Canon but dealt with the theme concerned and was consequently recommended. This article investigates which of the two appeals to history and history education dominates the representations of history in historical fiction for children written and recommended in the Canon.

Six books published in the period where the discussion about the role of history and history education in the lives of (future) citizens flared up are analyzed: *Anansi's Web* (Lydia Rood, 2006/2000), *Sisa* (Joyce Pool, 2002) and *Slavenhaler* [Slavetaker] (Rob Ruggenberg, 2007) are written for 12 year-olds. *Schoenen voor een slaaf* [Shoes for a slave] (Joyce Pool, 2010) and *Slaaf kindje slaaf* [Slave baby slave] (Dolf Verroen, 2006) are for 9–12 year olds. *Lang geleden...* [Long ago...] (van Dam, 2007) is for even younger children: 6–9 years olds. All six books are recommended as further reading about slave trade and slavery. *Shoes for a slave* was especially written for the Dutch Canon. How are national identity and the role of the Dutch in the slave trade and slavery depicted? Which literary strategies have been used to represent the Netherlands and the Dutch? And how does that relate to the discussion of social cohesion and the black pages of history?

That's Us! Heroizing the Dutch

All writers give a "statement of intent" (Genette, 1989). They draw an explicit line between the past and the present; that is, between the historical story told and present-day children reading it. Some of them explicitly aim at identification with past periods, events or people, using the personal pronouns 'we', 'us' and 'our' to present history. For example, *Long ago...* (van Dam, 2007, p. 137) states: "You are part of the past. All people in this book are a little like family."¹ This book includes fifty stories about people living in the past. All of them are more or less heroes; famous historical dukes, kings and inventors are featured, and also common people represented in prehistorical times are depicted as heroes, for they invent things such as farming and iron. When slavery is first mentioned, it is framed as a smart way to

¹ All translations from Dutch to English are my own.

become rich. The implied criticism of slaves' probable unhappiness is hard to detect, especially for seven year olds, for whom this book is meant:

The Dutch ships sailed across the ocean. This time to Africa. There, as many people as possible were captured and brought to Surinam. The Africans were forced to work on farms. [...] Nobody asked if these people were happy. The Netherlands could be satisfied: they did not find much gold, but they managed to become rich in the wonderful warm country of Surinam. (van Dam, 2007, p. 73)

The book explicitly adheres to the neonationalistic appeal in which history is seen as a vehicle for national identity and identification. The pronouns 'we' and 'us' are mentioned often, suggesting native Dutch people, given immigrants are never mentioned. These natives cannot but be proud of their forefathers, because even the black pages of Dutch history are framed as success stories. The second time slavery is mentioned, a key figure in the Dutch abolition of slavery is honoured with a chapter. The bad circumstances and treatment of slaves are described, but only as something Dutch people did not know about. The texts suggests that when they hear about it, they are stupefied and abolish slavery immediately:

They were astonished and said: 'Can this be possible? Do we treat the people of the Dutch East Indies, the Antilles, New Guinea and Surinam this badly? We have to abolish slavery. Everyone has the right to eat, drink, spare time and money. All people must be free.' (van Dam, 2007, p. 115)

This is clearly a progressive construction of history which suggests a teleological development of thought with the present as a more developed era (McCallum, 1999, p. 169). Implicitly, the Dutch are proclaimed innocent, for the slave traders and slave drivers are presented as 'Other'. As soon as the Dutch people living in the home country hear about slavery they condemn it, as if already sharing a present-day ideology of freedom and equality all along.

The use of an authoritarian narrator, who also relates the stories in *Long ago...*, was a very common narrative mode in historical fiction for children until very recently. Such a narrator functioned as a mediator between characters and reader, often attuning its ideology to the ideological frame of the reader (cf. Parlevliet, 2014, 2015). However, many authors of recent historical children's books choose a different position. They try to give historical figures or characters in historical settings a voice by using a first person narrator. In the case of books about slavery, when the slaves themselves are allowed to tell their story, it has a political and emotional undertone; the people whose history has been ignored for so long are finally given a voice.

This seems to be the case in *Shoes for a slave*, which is written especially for the Dutch Canon. It tells the story of the young African boy Ndjosi, who was born as a field slave and becomes a house slave. His new master renames him Baron. Quite surprisingly, Baron considers the white way of dressing and living superior to that of his own people. The boy admires the clothes of the white women and is proud to wear "the neat clothes of a house slave and not just a simple waistcloth" (Pool, 2010, p. 37). He longs to be like the whites: "That is how I want to be, so beautiful,

elegant and gallant” (p. 55). He competes with the other slaves for the whites’ goodwill. And when he is given the opportunity to accompany his master to Holland, he is thrilled: “Holland! I sighed. ‘I was going to Holland. Would the wonders never stop today?’” (p. 53).

When he arrives in Holland, the boy is excited to be allowed to sit on the box [“This would be unthinkable in Surinam” (p. 59)]. He considers the country much more developed than Surinam. When he finds out that it is not allowed to whip one’s servants in Holland, he wants to stay forever. His master praises him for assimilating so quickly, relating it to the boy being smart and eager to learn (p. 65). He promises to let him learn a trade and free him after a couple of years. However, his master breaks his promise. He gambles Baron away and the boy ends up as a field slave again. The book ends with his decision to run away.

Significantly, although his white master betrays him, the boy keeps longing for Holland. This is symbolized in his cherishing of the little chain he got from a Dutch servant. Also striking is the fact that Baron keeps his given name and never chooses to use his birth name Ndjosi again. Even when he is back in the fields, preparing his flight, he uses the name he was given by his former white master.

Consequently, *Shoes for a slave* only seems to give voice to the slaves, but this voice turns out to be imbued with an ideology of Dutch superiority. The first person narrator wants nothing more than to be like whites and live in Holland. Dutch people are perceived as superior and even the betrayal by the boy’s master does not change this. Moreover, assimilating to the Dutch way of living is considered to be a sign of intelligence and inquisitiveness. The story fits into the neonationalistic agenda perfectly. The slave boy seems to have been given his own voice, but it turns out to be the voice of a patronizing ideology of Dutch superiority.

That Could be Me... The Child as Mediator

To create a world that readers can relate to and at the same time describe events, past customs and ideas, writers of historical fiction have to balance between familiarity and strangeness or otherness (Stephens, 1992, p. 203). To make strange elements familiar a fictitious protagonist, although living in a different time and place, can appear surprisingly similar to contemporary readers. While other characters may display ideas and behaviour readers are far from familiar with, they are able to identify with the ideas and behaviour of the protagonist. Thus, the protagonist functions as a mediator between history and present. It is no coincidence the protagonist often rebels against those ideas and customs that have been rejected in the course of history. To make it plausible that a child can have such different ideas from the social environment, two procedures are deployed. The first is an implicit adherence to the Romantic image of the child as morally good, imbued with an open spirit and natural feelings of equality. The second is the integration of the concept of development; the child protagonist’s ideas and world-view follow history’s line of development from a historical ideology to a contemporary world-view (Stephens, 1992; Joosen and Vloeberghs, 2008, pp. 159–160). Both procedures are deployed in *Sisa*, a youth novel about slavery, also written by Joyce Pool (2002).

Sisa is about Map, the daughter of a planter in Surinam. Map, her mother and their personal slaves are on the way to their cousin's plantation, because the French threaten to attack their own. On the cousin's plantation, Map discovers how badly slaves are treated. The cousin abuses and mistreats them, sometimes causing their deaths, and punishes runaways' families severely. He thinks of them as animals. Map is astonished. She has grown up together with a slave girl, whose mother was Map's wet nurse: "Animals without any feeling? Who, slaves? Ruth and M'Amba, Kwasi and Maries?" (p. 17).

In *Sisa* the character of the cousin is a stereotypical slave driver, representing everything a contemporary reader abhors. "Dear niece," he says, "Slaves are not humans like you and me. They are dogs and nothing more. If you treat them kindly, they won't accept you as their master." (p. 21) The reader follows Map's growing consciousness of what slavery means. Coming from a plantation where they had been relatively good to their slaves, she learns what slavery actually means and starts questioning the concept.

The representation of Map as a naturally good child in contrast to the adults who accept and practise slavery is explicitly emphasized: Map is "different" (p. 49), a flower among other whites (p. 98), an "exceptional white person" (p. 81). When the cousin's plantation is attacked by the French, Map flees to the jungle with one of the house slaves. She lives in a maroon village for a while, a village of slaves that have run away, adopting the manners and way of living of the black people without feeling superior. She sympathizes with them more and more, even falls in love with her former house slave. When she returns to her father's plantation, she has changed. She is no longer a naive child, she has developed into a young woman with ideas similar to those of contemporary readers, ideas that will not be current until at least half a century later:

"You are as human as we are!" she says fiercely. "But instead of treating you like that, some masters flog their slaves to death and make their dogs attack slave children! It has to change! Someone should tell the slave drivers that you are not animals! Me, if no one else!" (pp. 144–145)

Map mediates between historical customs and contemporary ideology. Young readers are able to identify with her, because she does not contradict current ideas on slavery and the slave trade. She embodies familiarity, while other characters and the setting represent strangeness, otherness. This way she confirms the contemporary ideology of equality. However, there is still an element of white superiority to be discerned. When Map confronts her servant and half-sister Ruth with her new ideas, Ruth states that she would rather stay with her master who treats her well, than flee and fight for freedom. "You ask me if I want to be free," she says to Map. "Well, yes, of course! Really free, like white people. But in this country that doesn't exist for people with the colour of my skin. So I'd rather stay with a masra with whom I am all right." (p. 152) The black girl does not stand up to history as the white girl does. Moreover, when whites are threatening to attack the maroon village where Map lived for a while, she decides to go and warn them. According to this novel, the black people apparently still need a white person to arrange their lives.

As a character, Map does not represent contemporary ideas on slavery from the beginning. During the story, she develops other ideas because of her experiences. This element of a developing consciousness; growing towards a contemporary view on slavery during the story, is also deployed by Rob Ruggenberg in the novel *Slavetaker*. However, while both Pool's stories are monophonic—there is only one character through whose eyes the stories are represented—Ruggenberg wrote from the perspective of both the Dutch slave traders and the slaves. *Slavetaker* tells the story of Tyn, a Dutch boy who, after the death of his father, joins a ship to Africa to buy slaves. He wants to look for the half-sister his father begot by a black woman in Africa. Obaa, a rebellious half-blood who is not really accepted in her village, is made a slave by the Africans themselves and sold to Dutch slave traders. Tyn's and his half-sister Obaa's story are told simultaneously, which gives insight into both sides of history and both perspectives on the situation. In contrast with the young slave in Pool's book *Shoes for a slave*, Obaa does not consider whites beautiful, superior and enviable. On the contrary, she abhors even her own father: "Sometimes she saw, as if it was a bad dream, his pale and sweaty face. Those pallid, light blue eyes—brrr!" (Ruggenberg, 2007, p. 15). Tyn does not view black people as frightening when he sees them for the first time. He shuns the way they are treated and is astonished when the other seamen call them "frizzy cattle": "His mouth dropped open. Not human? Then, what about Obaa? She lives there as well, doesn't she?" (p. 62). However, when he suspects his half-sister to be killed by black people, he changes his mind. He abuses them, enjoys being carried by them and helps to brand them.

While Tyn struggles with the question of how to value slaves, which already points to contemporary ideology, the other Dutchmen are represented as real devils. Both in looks and in behaviour they are repulsive. They curse and maltreat, they have pale-red bellies with hair on them, they stink because they never wash themselves, they rape women and leave little children to die. They don't show solidarity with each other, they are opportunistic, and, as a repeated topos in the depiction of villainy in children's books, they are cruel to animals.

Moreover, the Dutch are not only represented as shockingly ugly and cruel, high ranking officials are made ridiculous. The Dutch governor in Brazil, Johan Maurits, is depicted as an opportunistic lover of art and science, keen on appearances; he sits in front of the window fully dressed, but beneath his table, his legs are bare. Childishly excited about a book, he forgets his bare legs and makes a fool of himself, appearing half naked. It is quite provocative to depict Johan Maurits like this, for he is still considered a significant Dutch historical figure: he established the Mauritshouse, which is still an important Dutch museum and houses the royal cabinet of paintings.

After Tyn has freed his half-sister, he struggles with feelings of guilt. As a reference to the discussion on the silence about the Dutch role in the slave trade in Dutch history books and politics until recently, Tyn writes his story down to acknowledge his role in history. He hopes it will give him inner peace. This way, Tyn symbolizes the Dutch; the historical Dutch in his role as slave trader, the present day Dutch in their struggle to deal with their guilty past.

Knowing Me, Knowing You: Polyphonic Representations

In the novel *Anansi's Web* by Lydia Rood (2006/2000), the story is also represented through the eyes of more than one character. Moreover, different layers of time are added. This novel covers the period from the early days of the slave trade until abolition, seen through the eyes of successive generations of slave traders, slaves, slave drivers and their descendants. This representation of history in a multitemporal narrative not only gives historical victims a voice, it also draws attention to the subjectivity of views. For example, the fortress build by the Dutch on the West coast of Ghana is described both by a Dutchmen, and a slave, both in history and in the present. Dutch Willem in 1700 is delighted with the fortress, “one could see it was built by the Dutch. It was a symmetrical building, proud and lofty, only manned by soldiers (...)” (Rood, 2006/2000, p. 25). In the same year, the slave Kofi calls it “a building of beasts”, hindering the view on his beautiful country which he has to leave behind (p. 75). In 2001, the fortress seems to represent only misery for the Dutch girl Helmi. “They (the slaves) couldn’t even see what they left behind,” she says. “Only those bloody awful walls” (p. 335). “Have a bit of respect, please,” her Surinam friend replies. “Without the Dutch I wouldn’t have existed” (p. 336).

The characters all represent different views on the history of the slave trade, alerting readers to the subjectivity of all accounts. History is thus represented as being open to several interpretative positions, inviting readers to draw their own relation to and judgement of this episode. At the same time, an implicit ideological frame expressing current views on slavery can’t be avoided. This is manifested particularly clearly in the use of a special form of dramatic irony. This strategy uses current facts which are commonly held to be true, to undermine a character’s ideas. For example, Willem never washes himself, while the black people do. He thinks it is “highly dangerous to life” (p. 57). Every reader will consider this untrue, which undermines also the rest of his views. By using this kind of dramatic irony, the narrator implicitly states that Willem’s line of thought is incorrect and his other views may be disputable as well.

Willem himself also doubts his own views, which again points to the ideological stance of the narrator. In the beginning Willem considers himself much higher than black people. But soon he starts to doubt this idea. Firstly, it turns out that black people keep slaves themselves, which contradicts his idea that black people should serve the white. But what disturbs him even more is that the longer he stays in Africa, the more he sees black people as human:

Something in the boy’s pose confused him; although his feet were chained and he was poorly dressed, he kept his head high and his shoulders tough as if *he* was in charge. Well, it is his country, Willem thought—but immediately he called himself to order. The boy was captured, a slave. [...] He was a commodity, nothing more. He was destined to work for the Dutch, God’s chosen people to rule the seas... (p. 30)

Later, Willem starts to wonder what black people think of the situation, but the thought scares him:

He called himself to order: such a ridiculous thought! He started to think them human! Perhaps he had stayed in Elmina too long. [...] See, the factor was right: one should not meddle with them. Before you knew you started to consider them worthy of compassion and understanding. (pp. 62–63)

Willem's account is alternated with the account of the young slave he watches. Later, the descendants of both boys are given a voice, relating the whole episode of Dutch slavery from their personal perspectives. The result is an open, dialogic representation of the Dutch slave trade and slavery in which all agents are given a voice, pointing to the subjectivity of history writing (McCallum, 1999, pp. 169–170; Joosen and Vloeberghs, 2008, pp. 155–156). This subjectivity is furthermore thematized in the last part of the book, in which three present day teenagers search for their identity in a multicultural Netherlands.

Do We Want to Know? A Dialogue Between Then and Now

The fact that the story set in the past is written in the present remains hidden in most novels. The present can implicitly be discerned from the ideology that is expressed by the narrator of the story. From the paratext, prefaces or epilogues, interviews with the author and even websites dedicated to the books, it is obvious that their point of view lies in the present. However, in most stories themselves this remains hidden. *Anansi's Web* is an exception. This book not only tells the story of the slave trade and slavery from different points of view, it also shifts between layers of time. It covers the period 1700–1863 chronologically in which the history of the slave trade and slavery is narrated through different agencies such as Dutch slave traders, representatives of several generations of slaves themselves and slave drivers, but this chronologic story is interrupted a number of times by 'interludes' in which present day street performances by two boys and a girl are described, who act out African stories of the spider Anansi. While the girl is clearly Dutch, the boys have different origins; one is black and the other mixed race. In the last part of the book, the readers learn that they are the descendants of the African slaves, the Surinam creoles and the Dutch slave traders and drivers. They all three search for their identity. History plays a big role in that search. They learn how their histories are linked. In the last part of the book, which takes place in the present, they discuss their perception of the past and how to deal with the different roles they represent. "We see things in each other we'd rather not see," the Ghanaian boy says. "Things from our past. [...] And neither of us really knows where we belong" (Rood, 2006/2000, p. 330). The Dutch girl struggles with feelings of guilt and at the same time she experiences a feeling of disconnectedness from her forefathers. "I don't know if I want to know all these things," she says. "It isn't very nice, what we did to you. And in Surinam." The Ghanaian boy disagrees. "It's your heritage," he argues (p. 330). And later on: "Family is not very important for you. We have a different view. Your father and mother, the four grandparents, their parents and their parents... they all count. They gave you life. It's a kind of... gift" (p. 332). The discussions between the three youngsters make the reader aware of the impact of the present on

the image of the past. When the Dutch girl struggles with feelings of guilt, the Ghanaian boy also tells her: “You left good things there, as well” (p. 330). She in her turn realizes that she needs him and his history to straighten out hers. “‘You would not say it, would you,’ she said, ‘that we are brother and sister?’” As a retrospective compensation, the African boy is given the last word in this: “‘I would,’ Kofi answered. ‘I knew that from the beginning’” (p. 333).

Is that Us? Alienating the Dutch

In *Anansi's Web* the characters living in the Twenty-First Century mediate between then and now by explicitly discussing their relation to history. In the other books, the protagonists mediate between the time represented and the time of representation by embodying current values in a historic setting. This way the tension between the strangeness of the past and the need for familiarity to interest present day readers and enable identification is solved. Even if the historic Dutch are represented as reprehensible, they are depicted as others and contrasted to the protagonist who represents a present day ideology. In the book *Slave baby slave* the author chose differently. Dolf Verroen did not try to familiarize history. On the contrary, he uses a strategy of alienation to portray Dutch slavery (cf. Dessauvage, 2014). And, even more, confrontationally he does so in first person narration.

The narrator is the 12 years old Maria living in one of the Dutch colonies. She has present-day privileges and concerns: developing breasts, looking forward to her birthday and presents. Then, suddenly, a clash with current politically correct thinking occurs: “The slaves danced and sang. Suddenly, I noticed how black they are, how beautifully white I am” (Verroen, 2006, p. IX). What follows is a disturbing image of the Dutch child: Maria is totally insensible to the feelings and fate of black people, she is only concerned with her own pleasures, she thinks them nothing more than a commodity or even animals, and she is not inclined to even consider otherwise. In other words she does not meet current ideology at all. Shockingly, Maria is given her own slave as a birthday present. And a whip to control him:

This is Koko, papa said.
A slave for our Maria.
Aunt Elisabeth gave me a whip.
It did not fit into the bag.
Too bad. (XVI)

Contrary to the protagonists in the other novels, Maria does not have the view which is often projected onto child protagonists in historical novels, showing that she is capable of questioning historic ideology. She is completely a child of her time. The title of the book, *Slave baby slave*, refers to a Dutch nursery song: *Sleep baby sleep*. It can be read as an ironic reference to soothe a child to sleep; Maria is soothed not to bother about the life of the black people who work for her family, their fate is hidden. Maria is totally focused on herself and does not know any better than to whip the slaves when they don't act according to her wishes:

I got a female slave from mother,
but everything goes wrong.
Nothing is on time.
My bath is almost cold,
my footcloth is not clean,
there are hairs in my brush
and the silver is not polished.
Yesterday I used my whip.
It did not help.
Only moaning and screaming. (XXIX)

In the other novels the historical Dutch were presented as others, reprehensible for their treatment of black people. However, through the protagonists the possibility of changing perceptions was incorporated. They embodied ideas on the reprehensibility of slavery which would ultimately lead to the rejection and abolition of the slave trade and slavery, thus enabling readers to identify with the characters in a historic setting. Verroen rejects this teleological strategy of representing the past. He created a protagonist who completely embodies the ideas of her time. This way he provokes a confrontation between past and present ideology intended to shock readers with an alienating effect. Instead of focusing on progress and projecting present day ideas on historical characters, the impermanence of human thought and social structures is emphasized. 'Us' becomes 'them'; the child is nothing more than a copy of historical adults in which we do not, or rather, would prefer not to recognize ourselves and there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between then and now. Instead of presenting the past as a comforting blanket to foster solidarity, this novel discomforts readers. It does not bring the past any nearer, it rather creates a distance to the forefathers and evokes the awkward question: is that us?

Conclusion

Historical fiction is a cultural practice that brings images of the past into circulation. Those images are constructed in a delicate balance between familiarity and otherness. In the novels investigated, otherness was found in the setting, while the ideological framework in most novels is carried by familiar, current ideas on the slave trade and slavery. This makes identification with the protagonists easy, even if they belong to a different group than the reader, such as slaves as opposed to the descendants of their white oppressors. However, the analyses of six Dutch historical novels for children on the slave trade and slavery shows how novels in which the world view of the protagonist clashes with that of contemporary readers creates a shock that might make a more lasting impression. These kinds of novels represent the tension caused by the recent political appeal for history to contribute to the enhancement of social cohesion on the one hand and acknowledge its black pages on the other. It is a tension between the evocation of national superiority and a confession of guilt. To deal with this tension authors balance between identification

and alienation. Five literary strategies can be discerned to represent the Dutch in this awkward episode of Dutch history, placing the novels on a scale that goes from the use of history as a vehicle for national identity to history as an accuser: heroizing the Dutch by a monophonic representation of history, projecting a historical development of thought on a single child protagonist who functions as a mediator between the past and the present; polyphonic representation, multitemporal representation and alienation. In *Long ago...* and *Shoes for a slave* Dutch superiority is emphasized. *Long ago...* highlights national heroes, focusing solely on the history of native Dutch citizens, and justifies its black pages by suggesting the people were ignorant of it. In *Shoes for a slave* an ideology of Dutch superiority is projected on a young black slave. *Sisa* and *Slavetaker* present child protagonists who mediate between past and present by going through the same development of thought Western civilization did. They symbolize a macro-scale development in an individual from a teleological perspective; the ideas the protagonists develop are presented as morally correct and an inevitable outcome of history and they are likely to correspond to the ideological frame of current readers. *Slavetaker* also offers a polyphonic representation, just as *Anansi's Web* does. These novels allow for non-Dutch voices in the representation of Dutch history, which points readers to the subjectivity of historical accounts. Moreover, *Anansi's Web* also offers a multitemporal representation in which this subjectivity of historical accounts is explicitly discussed. On the other side of the scale is *Slave baby slave*, which alienates the readers from their forefathers by causing a clash between current ideas about human rights and equality and the ideas of the protagonist, who is not at all susceptible to current points of view. The tension in the historical novels for children between identification and alienation, between heroization and admission, mirrors the tension in the discussion on the role of history in the lives of future citizens. Although a univocal collective memory is longed for, reality, both in the past and in the present, decides otherwise. There is not one story of who 'we' are, there are many.

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